

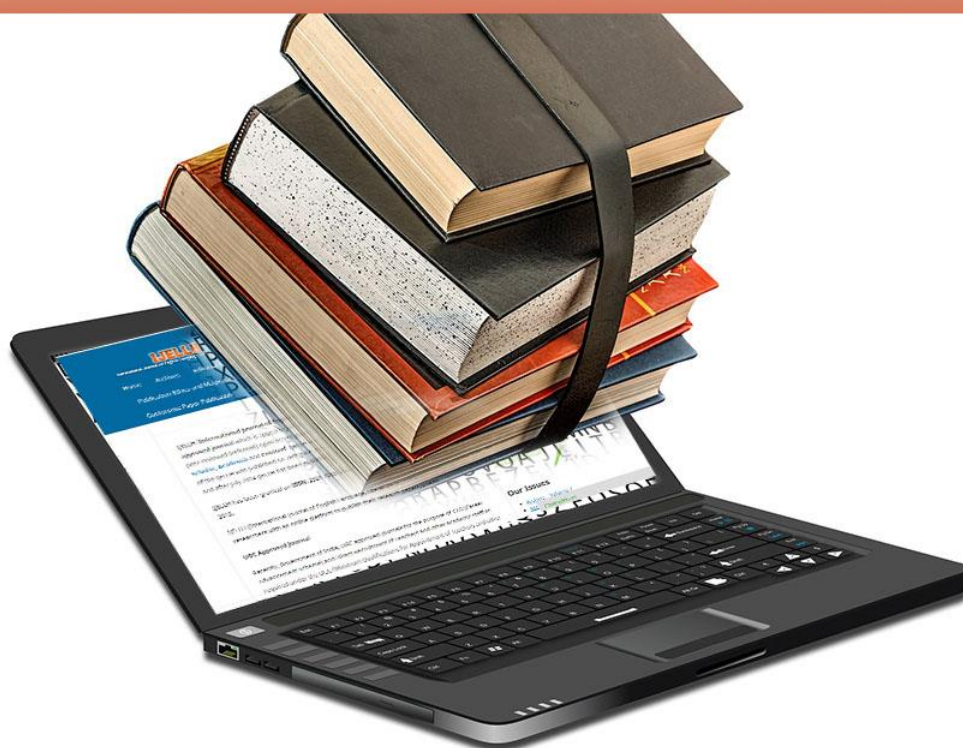
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The “Canniness of Modernity” and Racism in Anurag Mathur’s

The Inscrutable Americans.

The Inscrutable Americans the first novel written by the Stephanian, Anurag Mathur very well delineates the nuanced cultural positions of the Orient and the Occident. Gopal, the protagonist is in the US only for his education and naturally the US never becomes his second home. Gopal is a character without any sort of duality as he comes from a cut off town Jajau in Madhya Pradesh and does not have an urban education. He is greatly impressed by the ingenuity of the Americans in making and using machines and other gadgets as easy solutions in everyday life. The luxurious American cars, parking lots, malls, machines that gorge food, educational facilities and open air movie theatres often make Gopal to draw a comparison or rather a contrast with those in India.

The better living conditions in the USA, due to the development of science and technology are projected in the novel. Materialistic tendencies are clear but life is made more comfortable in the West:

The cans as well as the machine into which you dropped coins and which disgorged food enthralls Gopal. It still seemed incredible that machines could be so highly trained that they would not only provide you with different kinds of chocolates and sandwiches, but also give you back the change. One machine even consumed dollar bills with a greedy hum and sucked at your fingers as if it was a venus fly trap wanting more, before digesting your money with a rumble. (108)

Gopal soon understands that in America possessions become the man (47). The real worth of a person, his character and his visions as well as actions are often neglected and his possessions are looked upon to judge him.

There are also ample comparisons between American market scenario and Indian market scenario. Gopal wonders at a shopping mall there in America, where soft music and discreet lights provide an exquisite and serene atmosphere. He compares it with the atmosphere of an Indian market where a cacophony of varied blaring noise would be heard. Where peddlers and shop assistants yell and every tower wails; goods spilled out everywhere and pungent odors fill the surroundings.

At the same time Gopal is baffled by the “ridiculously inefficient” (194) bus service in America which shows how careless the state is in looking after the welfare of the low income group. The experience of Gopal is narrated: “He waited for nearly two hours for the bus to arrive: He cursed to himself throughout about the conspiracy by big American car companies to cripple the mass transportation system so that people would be compelled to buy cars” (194). Even the Indian middle class boy Gopal feels pity about the American lady Sue who was abandoned by her husband. Sue has only a tiny apartment with bare minimum furniture. The carpet, the furnishings and the visible cloth were worn and faded: “Gopal looked around again. It all seemed so simple and poor. A few prints hung on the wall and a spray of

flowers sat in a vase on the dining table. Opposite the sofa was a small television set. Gopal switched it on and found it was black and white. He watched it unseeingly for a while, feeling sorry for Sue's obvious poverty" (150-51). The dancing girl at the bar who coaxed Gopal for a drink (94) and Samantha the dancing girl at the lake party (223) represent the unfortunate ladies in America who make their living by stooping to the oldest profession.

The condition of the African races in America is also shown as vulnerable. Gopal is greatly disturbed "at the statistics regarding black unemployment and crime. He believed that people in such large numbers could only have turned to crime out of desperation. And Gopal didn't believe that a country as wealthy, as well run, as cohesive as the United States couldn't solve this relatively small problem if they actually wanted to" (195). He also wonders "why there wasn't a continuous violent insurgency by the blacks, given the wealth with which they were surrounded and their own poverty" (195).

The logic of the people who spear-head racial discrimination in the U.S. is also given in the novel, especially, through the conversation between Gopal and Tom. Gopal meets Tom the head-waiter of the expensive restaurant who had jabbed at him and gets into a frank discussion. Tom is an activist of the Redemptionist Church. He tells Gopal that his forefathers as well as his generation fought well for the cause of America in many places like Korea and Vietnam. He tells "We have paid our dues and we done all we could for this country, but we didn't do it to turn America into no nigger heaven, pardon my saying so" (175). Tom continues:

And I can tell you it makes me sick to my stomach the way this country's goin to hell and nobody's doin nothing about it. Well I reckon it's time some red-blooded Americans got together and told them all where to get off. Now nothing personal against you, sir, you being a visitor and all, bit coloured

blood is the real problem we got here. It's the Communists trying to do us in and it's time America woke up to that". (175-176)

Tom also laments that foreign people come and take their jobs to make matters worse. He adds, "We need American jobs for American people. We need to tell our people what the Communist menace and warn them about them foreigners" (176).

It is interesting to see how Gopal is influenced by the arguments for and against racial discrimination. After hearing Tom's version of the logic Gopal is really concerned. But then the Peacock--a black man who managed to grab a position in the social ladder--comes in the scene and Tom leaves the place. When Gopal tells the Peacock the feelings of Tom, he takes Gopal to a "ghost town", a place beyond a junkyard. The place is so wretched and the buildings are shaky and shabby. Gopal gradually realizes that all the miserable looking figures are black (179). They also see a drunken brawl and Gopal enquires about the whole thing. The Peacock replies: "Same thing that's happening to everyone around here. They is born poor, they stays poor and they dies poor. You'd be mad too if it happened to you" (179-180). Gopal is shocked and replies; "It is not even looking like America. No one is working, there is so much dirt, it is so poor" (180). Then the Peacock replies: "I figure they don't think it's part of America either. The white boys keep the junkyard between them and us and they don't want to see us or hear about us" (180).

The Peacock further explains that once he also lived there. He managed to go out of the place only because of his skills in football. Once his knees are injured, he may be back to the ghost town for ever (180). He also tells that, "There are a lot of soul brothers who didn't do so good that're still here" (180) and of course he mentions that the unlucky ones are either dead or in jail (180). The reflection in the novel is no exaggeration as Nancy Murray explains

that racial discrimination prevails in the USA even in the field of criminal justice: "...by the end of the twentieth century, it was becoming difficult to disguise the fact that criminal justice as practised in the United States had as much to do with race as with crime" (10). She also presents facts and figures to support the statement:

African Americans – 12 percent of the population – were incarcerated at three times the rate of Whites in the 1930s. By the mid of 1990s, they were imprisoned at eight times the rate of whites.... In 2009, the Pew Centre on the States reported that 7.3 million people in the US and one out of every eleven African American men and women were in prison or jail, or on probation or parole. (10)

Then the Peacock winds up the matter for the time being: "When I heard the white boy bellyaching about his problems, I thought maybe I otta show you some real problems. Show you how the black man lives. Ain't as cute as white America, is it?" (180). Then the Peacock frankly reveals his yearning at times to go back to Africa in order to escape from the spiteful stance of people. The voice of the Peacock proves that space is obtained by virtue of race rather than nativity and the subjugated people are permanently relegated into the peripheral abyss with a feeble outcry.

Lack of tolerance to accept heterogeneity and a longing for a homogeneous cultural space is reflected in the words of Tom. Shaobo Xie explains: "Once the Western nation-space is penetratingly transformed by ethnic Others, the threat of cultural difference becomes a problem of internal Otherness" (158). When Tom points out the toil of the founding fathers of America in order to claim the right over the land, he forgets the toil of the African Americans as Coetzee mentions when he comments on Van den Heever's farm novels: "...the founding fathers pay for the farm in blood, sweat, and tears, not in money: they hack it out of primeval bush, they defend it against the barbarians, they leave their bones behind in its soil" (85), but

“...the hands of black serfs doing the work had better not be seen. Blindness to the colour black is built into South African pastoral” (5) and the same is very relevant in the case of America. The extensive structures of exclusion and exploitation is seen very well in the novel.

It is quite clear that America hides the poverty of the blacks in America as the Peacock expresses it: “The white boys keep the junkyard between them and us and they don’t want to see us or hear about us” (180). Gopal himself could not believe whatever he witnesses and he feels it “like a part of the dream that America hid from everyone. He [Gopal] trudged home shaking his head in amazement, partly because there existed such dismal poverty in this richest of all lands and partly because such few people knew about it” (182). This American strategy which does not want to see or hear about the alterity says volumes about the unholy liaison between “Race” and “Modernity” or rather the lack of it.

Gopal is surprised that America which grants aids to countries like India is doing nothing to alleviate the untold miseries of its black population. He believes that America could easily solve the problem “if they actually wanted to” and it is in the answer to the question, why it does not want to, that the problem of the canniness of “modernity” lies. Angelia Poon in “In a Transnational World: Exploring Gendered Subjectivity, Mobility and Consumption in Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*”, writes:

The methods of capital accumulation and the related process of consumption in a globalized world vary significantly for different individuals and groups of people, many of them are excluded or restricted from participating in certain circuits of exchange depending on the different permutations of gender, class, race, sexuality and nationality which determine access to power and privilege.

(33)

The novel very well shows how capitalism permeates across the globe in myriad forms and relegates the underprivileged into deprivation.

It is evident that the ingenuity in using the sophisticated machinery and technology has made the West a more comfortable place to live in. The West has a smooth sailing in the matters of fundamental facilities while the East struggles to waddle through and get on. But the novels clearly show that all the progress in science, information technology, neo-liberal politics, and industrial and corporate economies have not helped much in the sufferings of the less privileged across the globe. “Modernity” has helped only the welfare of the multinational corporate companies, industrial and business tycoons and the governments who promote them. The poor, the common man, the small scale industrial and business class, farmers, the labour class and the like are totally marginalized. “Modernity” works only at the centre and the peripheries are promptly kept at bay for ever, relegating the alterity into invisibility. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* observes that, “. . . postcolonial critique bears witness to those countries and communities – in the North and the South, urban and rural – constituted, if I may coin a phrase, ‘otherwise than modernity’ ” (6) and he elaborates upon the condition of “the People-as-One that finally deprives minorities of those marginal, liminal spaces from which they can intervene in the unifying and totalizing myths of the national culture” (249).

Those who come under this category of people “otherwise than modernity” (Bhabha 6) is decided by virtue of their race. This deprivation of the people “otherwise than modernity” is palpable in the novel under study. This exactly shows how Eurocentric knowledge works to exclude everything else and this is the true nature of western concept of “modernity”. But it is the nexus between the abject neglect of the poor and the racial discrimination, which actually problematizes the entire novel. Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* says:

“When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders” (252).

Gopal himself realizes the gravity of racial discrimination when five drunken men attack him when he is with Randy. Their leader explains to Gopal, “. . . Comin here, takin our jobs, takin our women. I jest don’t like it, boy” (98). They cut away the front of his trousers to cut off Gopal’s genitals and flee away only by the sight of an approaching car (98). Colour is evidently a problem for Gopal in America. Soon after coming to America, Gopal realizes that “. . . the basic building block of his new persona was his colour” and he “constantly felt as though nature has constructed him badly” (89). It very well suggests that American identity is constructed by virtue of their race and not by any other criteria. Thus the novel confirms the fact that the discourse of “modernity” and development are part of the neo-colonialistic strategies in which the alterity is always appropriated and subjugated.

Bill Ashcroft in “Alternative Modernities: Globalization and the Post-colonial” opines about the origin and nature of “modernity”:

Modernity emerged at about the same time as European nations began to conceive of their own dominant relationship to a non-European world and began to spread their rule through exploration, cartography and colonization. Europe constructed itself as modern and constructed the non-European as traditional, static, and pre-historical.

.... Western modernity, then, may be usefully understood as coterminous with both imperialism and capitalism. (15)

The abject distress of the African Americans in the middle of the affluence of the country, apart from the deplorable conditions of the “developing” countries, establishes that the canniness of modernity is astutely linked with racism and this becomes the major finding of

the entire study. This exposition of the study gets sanction from what Bhabha establishes in *The Location of Culture*:

There is for instance a kinship between the normative paradigms of colonial anthropology and the contemporary discourse of aid and development agencies. The ‘transfer of technology’ has not resulted in the transfer of power or the displacement of neo-colonial tradition of political control through philanthropy – a celebrated missionary position. (242)

He explains the space of discrimination and despair as a mode of “negativity” that makes the enunciatory presence of modernity disjunctive. It opens up a “time-lag at the point at which we speak of humanity through its differentiations – gender, race, class – that mark an excessive marginality of modernity” (238).

Bhabha defines the “time-lag” as:

...the problem of the not-one, the minus in the origin and repetition of cultural signs in a doubling that will not be sublated into a similitude. What is in modernity *more* than modernity is this signifying ‘cut’ or temporal break: it cuts into the plenitudinous notion of Culture splendidly reflected in the mirror of human nature; equally it halts the endless signification of difference. (245)

What the novel disturbingly projects is this space of negativity in the time-lag of the canny “modernity”.

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